15. International and transnational interactions
15.4 Language in the world-system

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This article makes the case that there is a place within world-systems analysis for research focused on language. The various fields that study language have produced a large amount of material that could be brought into productive dialogue with the world-systems perspective. Given limited space, an attempt will be made to make this case in a single point. Namely, there is a highly significant correlation between a state’s strength and the linguistic diversity found within it; the stronger, resource rich, states of the core display less linguistic diversity than the relatively weaker, resource poor, states of the periphery. Specifically, when linguistic diversity is the probability that two randomly selected people from the country would have a different primary language (Lewis 2009) and state strength is tax revenue as percent of GDP (World Bank World Development Indicators 2010), this author finds a highly significant negative relationship between state strength and linguistic diversity in a large, diverse sample of countries for the year 2000.

World-systems analysis can help make sense of the lower degree of linguistic diversity in core states by pointing to the fact that the processes of creating centralized, bureaucratic state apparatuses were generally carried further here. This project created a group of central elites with a developing interest in communication between emerging political centers and the territory increasingly under its control, as well as facilitating the flow of information within the state bureaucracy itself. Historically, this meant that the dialect of the capital region became the language of nation-building. It gained status, and speakers, while other languages and dialects were marginalized or actively discouraged. It is noteworthy that in Europe this process occurred contemporaneously, and in close proximity to, the development of the printing press and nationalism, and it has been argued that this facilitated the process of linguistic standardization (Anderson 1983). Although complete linguistic standardization has not, and likely never will, occur, it was carried further by this conjectural synergy. It is noteworthy that the first dictionaries and written works of grammar for most of the European languages appeared in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, just in time for these newly standardized languages to be carried on waves of European colonization. The incorporation of the New World typically resulted in the decimation of indigenous populations, the eradication of their languages, and then a filling of territories with large numbers speakers of European languages. These states were arguably more coherent to the extent that their population enjoyed cultural cohesion through shared traditions and languages. Some of these former colonies also experienced upward mobility in the core/periphery hierarchy over the centuries.

Turning to the weaker states in the periphery, insights from the fields of language studies help to flesh out what world-systems scholars have written. Many peripheral states in Africa and Asia were incorporated into the world-system in the nineteenth century, and for various reasons, some
indigenous populations and their languages fared substantially better. These states then, typically, gained independence with a high degree of linguistic- and ethnic-diversity and this has made nation-building and the construction of a capable and democratic state that are widely perceived as legitimate more difficult. Even after formal independence, many former colonies continue to use the language of their colonizer in at least some spheres of life (such as courts, diplomatic channels, or higher education); to the extent that this interferes with cultural, political, and economic self-determination, the relationship between colony and colonizer is reproduced (Mazrui 1998).

In economic terms, it can also be pointed out that wherever linguistic diversity is higher, the coordination of individual economic activity and integration of national markets is likely to be a slower process. Here, insights from language studies fields can shed light on how capitalism effects, and is in turn effected by, underlying social structures. Indeed, linguists have linked the marked decrease in the number of languages over the last four or five centuries to colonialism and capitalist expansion. An analogy is often made to capitalism’s impact on the biosphere, and here again a world-systems perspective may be useful in deepening our understanding.

The structure of global language usage is also important for the future of global integration, especially the issue of English as a global *lingua franca*. While the imposition of European languages on the non-core was often a violent process, the more recent spread of English seems to be at least partly driven by its usefulness as a language of wider communication and its links to science and technology (e.g., Fishman et al 1996), and not by imperialism (as in Phillipson 1992). English became an important language for international communication largely because it was the language of two successive hegemons (Britain and the United States). But even within the context of a continuing slow decline of the hegemony of the United States, a wholesale replacement of English as an international language seems unlikely. The sheer growth in numbers of English speakers and the strong efforts of many important non-core states to develop English as a second language (especially China but also India and parts of Africa) means that individuals in disparate parts of the world have a shared language and can communicate with one another. This has important implications for the world-economy and also for world politics. And it is likely to facilitate the further development of widely shared normative elements in the world-system—the globalization of culture.

References